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To Smoke Out Spies, Offer an Amnesty

By Alton Frye

WASHINGTON — Amnesty for spies? Ridiculous! Who could think of leniency for traitors?

Those are typical first reactions to a notion prompted by the recent rash of spy cases involving Americans — namely, that an amnesty could be the best means of smoking out the spies not yet found. Properly framed, it could be an important national security tool for discovering what secrets have been lost. And it could even confound the spymasters of other governments.

Consider the situation strictly in national security terms. The United States has uncovered a relatively small number of agents. The harm they have done is palpable. The Soviet Union has acquired critical intelligence about some of the most

It would bedevil other governments

sensitive technologies in our inventory. The Chinese have received intimate reports on policy debates within several Administrations. The lives of American and foreign operatives have been placed at risk.

That much we know. What we can only guess is how many other agents have conveyed how much more information. The crucial need is to flush out as many of those other spies as possible. Conventional counterintelligence approaches, although necessary, will do only part of the job.

In weighing other strategies, one must give some thought to the psychology of spies. If recent revelations are any guide, a declining fraction of existing spies are committed ideologues. They are controlled by other passions: money, sex, the presumed glamor of espionage.

Yet it is also reasonable to believe that many individuals drift into the role of spy with a mingled sense of guilt at betraying their country. Unknown numbers might wish to abandon the path but find themselves trapped by fear of exposure, overt blackmail or the sense that there is no going back. Spies, too, have second

thoughts, and some of them might well abandon their treachery if they saw a more honorable alternative.

It is those second thoughts that provide the basis for an amnesty program. Would a significant number respond? The answer can emerge only from an actual experiment.

A promise not to prosecute spies who turn themselves in might trouble justice, but it could serve the nation's security in vital ways. If extended for a finite period, it would put pressure on active agents to make the break now, potentially short-circuiting Soviet and other networks. Offered a choice between severe penalties later and discreet confession now (thus protecting their reputations) those who accepted the offer could also provide valuable information about earlier penetrations of our security.

Above all, any spy who accepted the amnesty would be a candidate to be "turned," well-positioned to pass disinformation to his patrons. "Doubling" an agent is one of the finer arts in the business, more discussed than practiced. But there have been instances in which we chose not to prosecute known agents in order to exploit a channel. Amnesty might yield such opportunities on a grand scale.

One of the delights of the concept is that the very offer of amnesty would pose serious problems for the intelligence agencies of other countries. How could they be sure their operatives had not accepted the proposition? Every agent they run and every report they receive would be suspect. That prospect alone is sufficient argument to consider amnesty.

There can be little doubt that, under certain circumstances, the amnesty incentive is a potent one. New York State reports that almost 100,000 people responded to the recent offer to forgive past violations if tax evaders paid up their bills. These were generally law-abiding citizens who had strayed off the lawful path. Espionage is a different matter entirely, but no one knows how many spies see themselves as solid citizens caught up in matters beyond their control. Surely some would welcome the chance to redeem themselves. They may not deserve it, but the country should have no qualms about trading such favors for the intelligence coup they could buy.

In this realm, it is prudent to temper outrage with pragmatism. The United States needs to do a better job of protecting itself against those of its flock who play spotter for the wolves. The idea sounds absurd, but an amnesty for spies could be what we need to snare the wolves themselves. □

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